

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 HANOI 001989

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV, OES/STC (BPERRY), STAS (NNEUREITER),  
EAP/RSP, EAP/PD AND OES/PCI  
DEPT PASS HHS FOR OGHA/STEIGER; NIH/FIC/GKEUSCH;  
NIH/FIC/AHOLT; NIH/NIEHS/OLDEN, SASSAMAN;  
CDC/OGH/BLOUNT; CDC/CEH/SINKS, BARRETT, NEEDHAM;  
FDA/OIA/WBATS  
DEPT PASS USAID FOR G/ENV, G/H  
DEPT PASS EPA FOR WFARLAND  
DEPT PASS OSTP FOR GAINES  
BANGKOK FOR REO  
SECDEF ALSO FOR ISA/AP/LSTERN AND ES/WVAN HOUTEN  
USDA FOR FAA/AO/SSAP/HEUTE, ITP/ODA/SHEIKH  
NSC FOR BEARDSWORTH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [OSCI](#) [SENV](#) [EAD](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN UPDATE

REF: A. STATE 180975

[1](#)B. STATE 155248

[1](#)C. HANOI 0373

[1](#)D. HANOI 1264

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: On July 3, the Ambassador met with Vietnamese VFM Nguyen Dinh Bin to deliver Ref A talking points on the status of joint research on Agent Orange/Dioxin. Bin emphasized the GVN's gratitude for humanitarian efforts by non-governmental organizations and U.S. congresspersons who have advocated the establishment medical research center for Agent Orange "victims" in Hanoi. Bin appeared uninformed and misinformed about the status of U.S. contributions to promote the joint research program. Separately, on July 15, the Embassy received (via diplomatic pouch) and delivered a high-resolution gas chromatography mass spectrometer (GCMS) to the Vietnam National Center for Natural Sciences and Technology (NCST). A two-person EPA team visited Hanoi during July 24-30 to work with NCST scientists on plans/requirements for installation of the GCMS, and to map out a plan/schedule for training NCST scientists in a bioassay technology, training in use of the GCMS, and for characterization of a potential dioxin "hot spot" site in Danang Airport. As of July 2, the Carpenter-Tuong health research project had not been presented to Committee 33, and the Vietnamese members of the Joint Advisory Committee to be established per terms of the March 2002 MOU had not been appointed. END SUMMARY

-----  
Ambassador's Meeting with VFM Bin  
-----

[1](#)2. On July 3, the Ambassador met with Vietnamese First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dinh Bin, also a member of Committee 33, to convey the points raised in Ref A concerning the status and next steps on joint cooperation on Agent Orange/Dioxin issue. EST Officer accompanied the Ambassador. Mr. Pham Van Que, Deputy Director of the MFA's Americas Department, also participated.

[1](#)3. Prior to launching into a presentation of Ref A talking points, the Ambassador informed VFM Bin that many U.S. and international scientists did not accept claims made by Vietnamese scientists about the affects of AO/dioxin on the health of the Vietnamese people. The Ambassador noted that, for example, while Vietnamese scientists attribute numerous forms of birth defects on exposure of the parents to AO/dioxin, international experts suspect that many are the result of other factors, such as deficiencies in the mother's diet. Based on this genuine scientific dispute, the U.S. Government does not accept the label of "AO Victim" placed on virtually every afflicted child. Bin, without acknowledging the scientific debate, responded that the USG should deal with this was a humanitarian issue. Bin several times erroneously stated that dioxin was the "cause" of nine diseases. Bin also ignored the point that international scientific research has linked dioxin to only one form of birth defect. The Ambassador agreed that assistance to persons with health problems was indeed a humanitarian issue, which is why the U.S. Government supported health assistance programs in Vietnam and worldwide no matter what the cause. (COMMENT: When Vietnamese officials use the term "humanitarian assistance" related to the AO/Dioxin issue, they are actually talking about financial compensation to those persons whom the Government of Vietnam (GVN) has identified - without scientific evidence - as "victims of AO." END COMMENT.)

[1](#)4. After The Ambassador completed presentation of Ref A talking points, VFM Bin responded that he thought "good progress" had been made in joint scientific cooperation. He

noted that the March 2002 International Conference on AO/Dioxin had been the first of its kind, thus Vietnam's slow pace in implementing the terms of the MOU was "expected." He acknowledged that Vietnam needed to speed up the appointment of the members of the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), and noted that formation of the JAC was "important and inevitable." Bin stated that the Vietnamese side had sent draft terms of reference (TOR) for the JAC to the U.S. side, but had not received a response. EST Officer informed Bin that Office 33 had sent the TOR document via international mail to the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) on or about June 30, so NIEHS had not yet received the document. The Ambassador pointed out that developing and coordinating TOR should be a task for the JAC to accomplish during its first meeting, so it was premature to discuss TOR without a committee. (NOTE: EST Officer had received an informal copy of the TOR during a visit to Office 33 on July 1. The document was presented without explanation. On July 7, EST officer received an official copy of the document, delivered to the Embassy via the Vietnamese postal system. The envelope was postmarked July 1. Another copy of the document arrived at NIEHS on July 21. END NOTE.)

15. EST Officer gave a brief overview of status of "Project 2" (soil sampling and "hot spot" site characterization in Danang Airport). Bin, citing talking points provided to him by Office 33, pointed out that the U.S. had not yet provided Vietnam with the results of tests of Danang soil samples shipped to the U.S. in June 2002. EST Officer responded that, contrary to Office 33's information, the test results had been provided to scientists of the National Center for Natural Sciences and Technology in early March 2003.

16. Bin continued that the GVN highly appreciated the support received from NGO's and the efforts by three members of the U.S. Congress who advocate the establishment of a center for research and medical treatment of AO victims. Bin expressed hope that the USG would assist by providing funds for this center.

17. Deputy Director Que commented that the GVN did not view this as a "legal case," even though Vietnamese authorities were fully aware of the legal suit brought by U.S. veterans against the U.S. manufacturer of AO. Que admitted that the GVN had considered filing a similar suit, but had abandoned that idea several years ago because of its negative implications on the overall U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship. Que said the GVN had appropriated a large portion of its budget to assist people suffering from AO/Dioxin exposure in all locations. Que also reiterated Bin's appeal to view this as a humanitarian issue.

18. (COMMENT: Bin appeared uninformed and/or misinformed about several issues related to the status of joint cooperation on AO/dioxin. When EST Officer visited Office 33 on July 1, Dr. Nguyen Tien Dung had to cut the meeting short in order to go the MFA for a meeting to prepare the MFA for the Ambassador-VFM meeting. Based on remarks made by Dung and other Vietnamese scientists, the MFA had not sent a representative to attend working level meetings on the joint research program for a long time. It appears that Committee 33 has not met formally for an even longer time. The fact that Bin did not appear to be well-informed about the status of the joint program is very telling in terms of how senior GVN leadership views the scientific cooperation. When senior Vietnamese officials, either from MFA or other agencies, appeal to senior U.S. officials for assistance in "addressing the lasting effects of AO," they are not talking about joint scientific research and capacity building; they are talking about financial compensation and medical treatment for all those who are classified as "AO victims" and for clean-up of all potential dioxin "hot spots" on former U.S. military bases and other locations. Even when both sides use the term "humanitarian issue," usage of the term differs in both meaning and intent. END COMMENT)

-----  
Update of Status of Project 2  
-----

19. On July 14, the high-resolution gas chromatography mass spectrometer (GCMS) acquired by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) arrived in Hanoi via diplomatic pouch, and the Embassy delivered it to the Vietnam National Center for Natural Sciences and Technology (NCST) on July 15. NCST intends to place the GCMS on the ground floor of NCST's Institute of Chemistry. EPA officers William Coakley and Vance Fong visited Hanoi July 24-30 and met with NCST scientists from the Institute of Chemistry and Institute of Biotechnology who are the principal researchers participating in "Project 2" (environmental research on a suspected dioxin "hot spot" in Danang Airport). The primary Vietnamese contacts were Dr. Dang Thi Cam Ha, Head, Environmental Biotechnology Laboratory; and Dr. Pham Huu Ly,

Deputy Director, Institute of Chemistry. (NOTE: The EPA team will prepare a full, separate report on their visit. END NOTE)

110. The primary purposes of this visit to NCST were to unpack and inspect all GCMS components, review in detail the requirements and specifications for the installation as well as the installation schedule to include assembly and performance testing of GCMS and training of NCST personnel in its use. These tasks should all be accomplished by November 2003.

111. During the visit, the EPA officers informed NCST scientists that EPA intends to fund the training of two NCST scientists in a two-week session at the laboratory of the company that produces the CALUX bioassay screening technology. This training covers mammalian, liver cell culturing and bioassay procedures, and all extractions, cleanup, and analytical software procedures. Following this training in the U.S., the company will provide additional training at the NCST lab and provide all necessary supplies and chemical reagents.

112. The two EPA officers and NCST scientists opened all the crates containing the GCMS components, inspected the separate components for any damage (none detected), and conducted an inventory (nothing missing). They also inspected the room that is being renovated to house the GCMS and advised the Vietnamese on requirements for electric power, cooling water, air conditioning, measures to eliminate vibrational interference, electrical outlets, and emergency shut-off switch.

113. On July 26, the EPA team met with Dr. Ha, Dr. Ly, and Colonel Nguyen Quang Toai, Department of Science, Technology and Environment, Ministry of National Defense (MND), to discuss in general terms a tentative plan and techniques for hot spot site characterization and a subsequent pilot remediation project at the former AO storage and loading area at Danang Airport (the suspect dioxin hot spot from which soil samples were taken). The discussions focused on possible soil sampling techniques that could most efficiently and effectively determine the scope of the hot spot and paths/routes of potential migration of dioxin away from the hot spot. Dr. Ha (apparently without prior coordination with Ly and/or Toai) suggested that Dr. Toai would visit NCST on July 28 or 29 to provide more details concerning the actual dimensions of the storage/loading area, the surrounding topography, and stream that passes by the area. However, Dr. Toai never visited NCST for follow-up discussions.

114. On July 29, Dr. Dang Vu Minh, General Director, NCST, hosted a lunch in honor of the EPA officers to acknowledge their efforts in Project 2 and the acquisition and delivery of the GCMS. Dr. Minh was extremely grateful for the GCMS and stated that he hoped the installation could be completed by the end of the year so that soil sampling using the GCMS could be accomplished by January 2004. He said he intended to request additional funds from the Ministry of Science and Technology (one source of NCST's budget) for upgrading the room containing the GCMS. He also expressed great enthusiasm about the potential of receiving the CALUX technology. (COMMENT: Dr. Minh is a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam and a member of the National Assembly, so he has some political clout as well as scientific expertise. He is a chemist and former Director of NCST's Institute of Chemistry. His support for Project 2 is very important. END COMMENT)

115. Overall, the visit was successful and productive. The Vietnamese are very interested in moving forward with certain aspects of Project 2. The EPA team and NCST scientists devised a schedule of events (installation of GCMS, training in use of GCMS, training in CALUX technology, transfer of CALUX technology) per EPA's objectives. However, EST Officer and the EPA team detected several potential negatives:

--In discussions on hot spot site characterization and remediation, it became apparent that differences in opinion on "how hot is hot" and/or "what's hot and what's not" could surface as we attempt to move forward in developing a site characterization plan. When the EPA team explained U.S. guidelines and standards for levels of contamination permitted for residential vice industrial areas, the Vietnamese responded that the Vietnamese leadership would not accept such a distinction and would want remediation to bring contamination down to a level fit for residential purposes. At this point, EST Officer pointed out that since Vietnam, not the U.S., would pay for remediation efforts beyond this one pilot project, the Vietnamese leadership would probably have to adopt a less rigid policy.

--In early March 2003, the EPA had sent the NCST scientists the test results and analyses for the ten Danang

soil samples shipped to the U.S. in July 2002. Prior to shipment, Dr. Ha and Dr. Ly had agreed to perform similar tests (possibly with low resolution GCMS) on samples of the same soil in order to have a comparison of the two test results. When the EPA officers inquired about NCST's test results (which EPA had never received), Dr. Ha replied that she did not have sufficient funds in her budget to pay for the tests. According to Dr. Ha, the cost for a test conducted in Vietnam was \$600/sample. The EPA team obtained Ha's agreement to have tests conducted on 3-5 of the most highly contaminated of the ten samples. This exemplifies a persistent detractor to establishing a reliable partnership - verbal commitments from the Vietnamese side during face-to-face meetings are often ignored and the Vietnamese often do not respond in a timely manner to queries via e-mail.

--The role of the MND and its cooperation with NCST and EPA is critical to the success of site characterization and future pilot remediation project at Danang. More than one year ago, EPA initially requested past sampling results conducted by either MND and NCST, but the Vietnamese have not delivered. EPA officers and EST officer sense that there potential conflict between NCST and MND could develop over control of the joint project. It is very possible that MND is envious of the technical and material support (lab equipment, training, GCMS) given to NCST.

-----  
STATUS OF HEALTH RESEARCH AND JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
-----

¶16. In a letter dated June 23 (postmarked July 1), Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Sinh, Director, National Environmental Agency (NEA), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, responded to a 27 February 2003 letter from Dr. Kenneth Olden and Dr. Anne Sassaman of NIEHS urging the Vietnamese to appoint members to the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). Sinh's letter was addressed to Olden, Sassaman, and Embassy EST Officer. The letter ignores the critical issue of the JAC, but takes the offensive to criticize the U.S. for delays in Project 2. Pertinent translated extracts follow. BEGIN QUOTE: Although recently there were organizational changes in the Government, such as some ministries were split and some new ministries have been established, these changes have not affected the activities of the Steering Committee 33. We also note the delay by the United States in the implementation of Project No 2. The Vietnamese side has invested in the construction and provided funding for the newly built laboratory belonging to the Institute of Chemistry, National Center for Natural Sciences and Technology, which will be used for Project No 2. At the same time, we have sent 10 soil samples of the Da Nang airport area to the United States for dioxin analyses as per the agreement between Vietnam and the United States under Project No 2 framework. We look forward to the United States' prompt completion of Project No 2. In particular, the United States will follow the plan agreed upon in Hawaii on the provision of some testing equipment and instruments, and on completion of some analytical methods including the Calux analytical method and a high resolution GCMS in order to enhance the quality of residual dioxin assessment at site, as well as to have scientific basis to determine poison cleaning methods for Da Nang area in the future. END QUOTE.

¶17. NIEHS did not receive this letter until July 21. Although the letter does not mention an attachment, a draft TOR for the JAC was attached without explanation. Also, Sinh's letter implies erroneously that EPA made a formal commitment to provide the GCMS. EPA only promised to make a serious effort to locate a used GCMS. The Vietnamese were made fully aware that funding for this acquisition was not readily available within EPA's budget. The fact that EPA delivered reflects highly on their positive attitude toward achieving success in this project. The letter also does not give EPA credit for providing test results on the 10 soil samples or for supplying the majority of the equipment and supplies for the laboratory in NCST. EST Officer and Dr. Sassaman are preparing a response to Sinh.

¶18. On 1 July, EST Officer met with Dr. Nguyen Tien Dung, Director, Office 33. Dung stated that the Carpenter-Tuong health research project had not yet been submitted to Committee 33 for review and approval. Dung said that he had sent the grant proposal back to the Ministry of Health for further review and comment because he wanted to know how this project would relate to a similar health research project currently funded by the GVN. Dung could not state with certainty when the proposal would be presented to Committee 33 or when the GVN would appoint members of the JAC.

¶19. As of August 1, the NCST had not yet received approval from Committee 33 to hold a joint workshop on remediation technologies to be funded and joint organized by NIEHS, tentatively scheduled for early November 2003. NIEHS is

funding the travel of two NCST scientists from the Institute of Biotechnology and one officer from NCST's International Cooperation Department to visit NIEHS in Research Triangle Park and to visit EPA in Washington, DC in late August - early September. The purpose of the meetings is to plan the remediation workshop and discuss overall cooperation in environmental research.

PORTER